

Broadcast review of:
"A Short History of the West Indies"
by Parry and Sherlock

Today West Indian Society is going through a social, economic and political revolution. The dynamic for this revolution comes from the national movement. This powerful force is knitting together the scattered and divided peoples of the British Caribbean, and thousands of West Indians are beginning to feel that intense and electric experience of knowing themselves to be a nation. New horizons are opening before them and they are awakening to the stimulating experience of self-consciousness and self questioning.

One of the most important elements in this new experience of self questioning is the desire to take a look back into the past; to try to analyse and understand the forces that have shaped West Indian Society, created its sense of values, and made the people and their homes what they are today.

Unfortunately, for a long time West Indian history was written not so much for its own intrinsic interest but rather as an appendix to the history of European countries, in order to explain movements and events in that part of the world.

One of the things naturally expected of the University College of the West Indies in that an ever increasing volume of research would be done on themes of West Indian History and that the results will be published in a form of interest not only to serious students of history but to the reading public at large.

In the Summer of this year the book entitled "A Short History of the West Indies" was published. This book has been written jointly by John Parry, an Englishman, and formerly Professor of History at the U.C.W.I. and Phillip Sherlock, a well-known West Indian, Vice-Principal of the College.

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The purpose of this book is to present a comprehensive study of the History of the Islands - Spanish, French and English - from the time of their discovery by Columbus down to the nationalist movements of the present day.

This, you will agree, is a formidable undertaking and one made even more difficult because the authors have limited themselves to the short *compass* of two hundred and ninety five pages. It is to their credit, therefore, that they have achieved a considerable measure of success and the fruit of their labours is a volume which presents the main results of the recent historical research in a lucid, succinct and readable style.

The method adopted by the authors in setting out their material is a compromise between the analytical and the chronological - that is, they have tried to present events in the order in which they occurred while at the same time attempting to analyse the underlying causes and the results of those events and to estimate their significance for the whole of the story.

Inevitably any comprehensive study of Caribbean History must be concerned with two major themes: the first arising out of the fact that for a great part of their history the islands were regarded as a sort of corridor, through which ships and men passed on their way to the Spanish Main or from the Spanish Main outwards to Europe. The authors themselves prefer to consider the islands as "outlying barbicans" of ^a ~~the~~ gate: a gate which men of the late 15th century believed to lead to Cathay and the Far East; but which they afterwards discovered ~~led~~ to the gold and silver of the Spanish main. In our own times the islands have again become the barbicans to that modern gateway - the Panama Canal. The other theme, the one which usually dominates histories of the Caribbean is the story of the introduction of sugar and its ultimate monopoly of the islands. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that the History of the British /and.....

and French West Indies is mainly the history of sugar cultivation. The importance of slave trade; the whole system of slavery, with its important social, economic and political concomitants are all the results of the almost exclusive devotion of the islands to the cultivation of sugar.

Both these themes, and their ramifications, have been skilfully handled by our authors; nor have they failed to point out the far reaching consequences of the inter-action of the two forces on the life of the islands. For one thing, they maintain that the tendency of West Indians to look outwards to Europe rather than inwards to themselves is a direct consequence of this. Hence, for three centuries West Indian society was an impermanent and makeshift affair. Even in the days when the islands were the richest and most ^{prized} ~~prized~~ possessions of the English and French Crowns, their wealth served only to emphasise their dependence on the metropolitan countries and ~~xxx~~ to facilitate the speedy return of the white planters to their European homelands.

In the treatment of their material the authors have, with one notable exception, taken an impartial and objective view of the people and circumstances they describe. This is very important for the study of West Indian history, since many people tend to read their present prejudices back into the past; and some writers have violated their work by emotional appeals and very one sided points of view. In dealing with the question of slavery in particular our authors display a keenly critical and nicely balanced attitude. They contend, for instance, that "Slavery as a rule was not so much deliberately cruel as arbitrary"; that the planters were not necessarily brutal and barbarous , "for as a matter of fact the owner of a useful animal does not, as a rule, wantonly destroy it". But on the other hand, they also point out that even at its best, slave society was vaguely restless and inarticulately unhappy and /at.....

at its worst it was savagely and explosively resentful.

Another commendable feature of this work is the importance it attaches to things which have become characteristic of modern West Indian life but the development of which has generally been ignored. One example of this is the introduction and cultivation of crops or fruits which have become a staple part of West Indian diet. There is an interesting section in which the origin of that "gastronomic marraige" ackie and salt-fish is described. The ackie and the mango were both brought from West Africa by slave ships to help feed the slaves, especially in time of war when supplied from the Pacific for the same reason but curiously enough the slaves refused to touch it and left it to the pigs for nearly half a century!

Here and there, throughout the book the authors pause, as it were, to attract our attention to some interesting detail of the story. They seem in particular to have a great admiration for the architecture of those elegant structures which the rich planters in both English and Spanish islands built for themselves. They have included a few photographs to illustrate the architecture of these buildings and as a matter of fact, the book is well provided with illustrations of particularly of sugar mills and methods of cultivation at various periods.

The work of course has its defects. It is designed not only for the serious student but also the general reader. It should therefore not assume, as it does in many places, a background knowledge of the lesser known personalities of the story or of some of the more important economic theories. For instance a lucid explanation of the mercantile theory of Empire would give the reader a clearer understanding of the forces which brought about the rise and fall of West Indian prosperity.

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There are two chapters on 18th century Naval Warfare in the Caribbean in which the authors seem to have lost control of their material and consequently disgorged upon the reader a catalogue of uninteresting facts.

I said a moment ago that with one notable exception the authors have maintained an objective view point. This exception is in the case of Haiti. The revolution which produced the modern Negro Republic is one of the most absorbing and revealing movements in all West Indian history. The complex and shifting alliance between the great and small White planters, the mulattoes and the slaves; the influence of French revolutionary ideas in fostering a rebellion of slaves; the rise and fall of Toussaint, Dessalines and Christophe; all these offer excellent opportunities to the analytic historian, not to mention the romantic writer. Our authors have however done less than justice to the whole movement. Their ^{unfascinating} account is vague and ~~unsatisfactory~~ and their attitude to the history of Haiti is distinctly prejudiced and somewhat unworthy of their otherwise high standards. Despite these minor criticisms, the book is a valuable piece of work and well worth the reading. It gives a very clear picture of the main forces that have dominated West Indian history. It will certainly stimulate a desire for more detailed studies of the region's history. And I have no doubt that such studies will also be forthcoming from the University College of the West Indies.